

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 226 262

CG 016 454

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TITLE Factors Related to Coping Strategies Employed by Older Adults.
PUB DATE Aug 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (90th, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982). For related document, see CG 016 453.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); *Coping; Emotional Adjustment; *Older Adults; *Personality Development; Personality Traits; Problem Solving; Quality of Life; *Self Concept; Social Adjustment; *Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

Very little research has been undertaken to assess what factors are related to the utilization of coping strategies to deal with the losses associated with aging. Volunteers (N=40) 65 years of age or older were interviewed to determine if people at different levels of ego development differ in the number and type of coping strategies employed in response to the occurrence of life events, and whether there were differences in the helpfulness levels of these strategies. The results indicated that: (1) post-conformists reported a significantly greater number of helpful coping strategies for dealing with the stresses of later life; (2) although a number of the coping strategies were employed by a majority of the respondents in both groups, the coping strategies that were employed predominantly by the conformist group involved denying the severity of the event or trying to repress or avoid dealing with the situation; and (3) post-conformists utilized more cognitive strategies that served to enhance their understanding of the situation, formulated alternative courses of action, and anticipated the consequences of their behavior. The findings suggest that the primary factor in effective coping is how the person views the situation and that identification of levels of ego development could aid in interventions with older adults. (JAC)

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Factors Related to Coping Strategies Employed by Older Adults

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Old age is often characterized by losses in the social, physical, and economic realms, and the consequences are often compounded by psychological and biological transformations. Pfeiffer (1977) proposed that most deterioration in mental health during the later years of life is due to the unsuccessful or ineffective means with which the elderly deal with the stresses of later life.

In the present context, coping refers to those things that people do to deal with potentially harmful situations. In a theoretical treatment of coping, Lazarus (1966) emphasized the mediating cognitive process of appraisal, which is a perception distinguishing the potentially harmful situation from the beneficial or benign. Coping processes were viewed as a response to the perception of some threatening condition and of potential avenues of solution. The appraisal process involved a transaction between the person and the environment in terms of the cognitive process by means of which a given person evaluated information about the environment.

Havighurst (1968) emphasized the role of adaptation, suggesting that the individual continually worked to adapt himself or herself to the demands encountered throughout life. He concluded that successful aging consisted of successful adaptation to changes in the body and the social environment and that personality organization and

coping style were the primary factors involved in the life adjustment of the individual as he or she grew older. He proposed that the important factor in growing older was the manner in which the individual dealt with the diverse social and biological contingencies in his or her life.

Lazarus (1966) emphasized that coping involved an appraisal process that was determined by a cognitive process. A situation was considered to be highly stressful if it was viewed as presenting a serious threat. This was especially so if an individual believed his or her resources for dealing with it were inadequate, whether they actually were or not. Recent studies have found that certain individuals were largely unsusceptible to stressors that would have been greatly demanding for many people (Kobasa, 1979). Studies of the process of coping and adaptation, and the role of psychological appraisal of situational demands, led to a recognition of the significance of cognitive development (Havighurst, 1968; Shalit, 1977).

It was thought that the differences in cognitive development could be accounted for under the rubric of ego development (Loevinger, 1970). The process of ego development proceeded along a series of successive stages and levels involving progressively more complex, differentiated, and integrated modes of thinking. The construct of ego development as a measure of cognitive development seemed to offer a framework to account for the varied ability of individuals to develop more, and

effective, coping strategies to a variety of situations. Swensen (1977) wrote:

Ego development theory suggests that, just as there is variation in the degree to which situations determine behavior depending on the strength of the situation, there is also variation in the extent to which different people are affected by situations. The behavior of people who are at the lower levels of ego development is determined to a large degree by the immediate situation. As we move up to the higher levels of ego development we find that people are more able to transcend the situation (p. 53).

Guttman (1978) investigated the relationship of selected life events to styles of coping in aged individuals. Two coping styles were differentiated. One strategy involved taking action in order to minimize the stress associated with life events, while the other strategy was characterized by a restraint from action to deal with these occurrences. It was found that respondents who actively dealt with the problems associated with the occurrence of life events considered more possible solutions, perceived their course of action as desirable, and viewed their solution as successful more often than did those persons who did not actively seek to overcome the problems associated with the life events.

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) found that the experience of stress associated with the occurrence of life strains depended

not only on what the individual did in response, but also on how much was done. The investigators found that no single coping mechanism was effective in protecting against the stress resulting from life events, and that having a particular coping strategy to call on was far less effective in helping people withstand threats from events and objects in their environment than was having a variety of strategies to call on.

The idea of coping has been used to cover the broadest forms of adaptive behavior. By focusing on task-oriented coping strategies, progress toward more completely understanding how people handle everyday life stresses and major life crises and transitions is possible. The purpose of the present study was to assess the relationship of the situational and psychological factors of life events and ego development to the number and type of coping strategies utilized in old age.

Subjects and methods of procedure. The sample included forty people of both sexes, 65 years of age or older. The population studied was those adults 65 years of age or older in a two county area of north-central Indiana who agreed to be interviewed. Subjects were volunteers from senior centers participating in a network of discussion groups facilitated by students and faculty from Purdue University, and volunteers were also obtained from the Purdue Retirees organization.

The design of this investigation was that of a field survey, utilizing standardized questionnaires in an interview format for the collection of data. The interviews were

conducted at the subject's home by a trained interviewer. In this study, the Coping Inventory (Horowitz & Wilner, 1980) was regarded as the dependent measure, assessing the frequency of use and the helpfulness of a number of coping strategies in response to the occurrence of selected life events, and in relation to the conformist and post-conformist levels of ego development. Independent variables were in two categories: 1) an assessment of situational demands as measured by the Life Events Questionnaire (Horowitz & Wilner, 1980), and 2) ego development as measured by the Sentence Completion Test of Ego Development (Loevinger & Wessler, 1970).

Results. A multiple regression analysis was performed with the number of coping strategies reported to be very helpful as the dependent measure. The ordering of variables employed in this analysis were life events, ego development, and an interaction term which was the product of life events and ego development. The results of this regression analysis were found to be significant and explained 23.4% of the variance in the dependent measure ($F=3.66$, $p=.02$). Ego development was found to account for 20.8% of the variance out of the total of 23.4% explained ($F=10.04$, $p=.003$). This finding indicated that ego development was the primary factor involved in predicting the effective utilization of coping strategies.

An item analysis of the Coping Inventory comparing

conformist and post-conformist levels of ego development was computed in regard to their overall utilization of coping strategies and utilization of coping strategies which were very helpful. Using cross tabulations, significant differences between conformists and post-conformists emerged.

Whereas a number of the coping strategies were employed by a majority of the respondents in both groups, some differences were demonstrated to exist in respect to their selective utilization as well. The coping strategies which were predominantly employed by the conformist group involved denying the severity of the event by seeking a humorous or tragicomic element, or by trying to repress or avoid dealing with the situation by attempting to put the event out of mind or by trying to find new interests. The coping strategy that the majority of the conformist level respondents found to be very helpful was that procedure which involved rationalizing the severity of the situation by reminding themselves that what has happened could have been worse.

The post-conformists utilized more cognitive strategies that served to enhance their understanding of the situation, and formulated alternative courses of action and anticipated the consequences of their behavior. The post-conformists reported a greater number of coping strategies to be very helpful, and these strategies included methods which served to promote an understanding of the circumstances and which

facilitated resolution or the development of an attitude of acceptance of the problematic situation.

Conclusions. A multiple regression analysis was computed with the number of coping strategies reported to be very helpful as the dependent measure. The results of this analysis showed that of a total of 23% of the variance accounted for, ego development alone explained 21% of this variance. This finding served to indicate that ego development was the primary factor involved in predicting the helpful utilization of coping strategies. The implication may be that successful or effective employment of coping strategies in response to life events is indeed related to cognitive appraisal of the situation, and persons at higher levels of ego development are able to more effectively evaluate the circumstances leading to the helpful use of coping strategies.

The post-conformists were found to employ effectively a greater number of coping strategies that included operations which served to change the situation, control or modify the meaning of the events and to control the stress associated with the occurrence of life events. This finding points to a difference between conformists and post-conformists in the means they have available to effectively handle stressful life events. Whereas conformists effectively cope by rationalizing the severity of the situation, post-conformists effectively act to understand and resolve problematic circumstances and to develop an attitude about life events which is helpful in

dealing with the strain associated with stressful experiences.

The results of this investigation corroborate findings by previous investigators. Guttman (1978) differentiated between action-takers and nonaction-takers as styles of responding to the occurrence of life events. Action-takers were characterized as those who considered more possible solutions, perceived their course of action as successful more often, and who viewed their action as more desirable than did the nonaction-takers. This characterization of action-takers appears to describe those at the post-conformist level of ego development. In the present study post-conformists, in contrast to conformists, were found to generate and use more coping strategies in response to life events. Post-conformists reported a significantly greater number of coping strategies to be very helpful in reducing the strain, and their coping repertoires included strategies which served to promote understanding and resolution of problematic situations.

The outcome of the present study suggests that although the situation has some relationship to coping responses, the primary factor that determines how effectively a situation is handled is how the person views it and, consequently, their ability to formulate possible solutions in light of their appraisal. This study serves to reiterate the importance of psychological appraisal processes in influencing how a person copes with stressful life events. In addition, it implicates ego development as a characteristic of the person which

differentiates individuals on the basis of their respective methods of responding to potentially stressful situations. Knowledge of effective coping strategies, and the identification of the situational and personality factors associated with them, could assist in advancing interventions by specifying specific coping strategies by which older adults, at varying levels of ego development, could best manage their problems and difficulties.

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